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Mundus Imaginalis et Intellectus Agens:

Imagination and agency in making relational organigrammes
Imagination et agence dans la création d'organigrammes relationnels

Robert Williams

Professor of Fine Art, The University of Cumbria Institute of the Arts. UK

I am more than happy to adopt the French term 'Organigram', it has a much better ring to it than either of the English equivalents, *Flow Chart*, *Mind-Map*, or the frankly disturbing *Thought-Shower*, despite the fact they relate to similar visualisations that often presents information or ideas relative to each other in diagrammatic form. For my contribution to this seminar, I would like to introduce and discuss three related pieces of artwork, all of which emerged from a number of arts research seminars involving artists and post-graduate fellows at Mildred's Lane Projects, based deep in the Pennsylvanian rural of the United States¹.

Each of the works discussed here explore the relational and dialogic aspects of both the process of development and the organization of complex ideas, and how this plays out in consideration of impossible materials such as ghosts, alchemical processes, and folkloric relays. The works, one an installation of objects, one in printed form and the other a large site-specific mural, are developments of research informed seminars associated with my twenty-one year-long project *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, the Alchemist's Shack project². These biennial sessions often begin with a lecture where I identify two guiding principles drawn from the famous aphorisms of the American artist Sol le Witt - *Aphorism number 1* which states that 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists – they reach conclusions that logic cannot reach', and the paradoxical statement from *Aphorism Number 5*: 'That Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically' (Harrison & Wood 1999).

The idea of exploring the unseen, using such impossible materials, informs much of my recent activity, either solo or in collaboration with others, which have involved the consideration of radioactivity, deep-time geologic repositories, myth, legend and ghosts in the project *Cumbrian Alchemy*³; or the tracking of a ghost story concerning an invisible haunted skull in more than one hundred printed accounts, across more than 100 years of

¹ Mildred's Lane Projects is hybrid educational and living establishment – rather like a relational Black Mountain College, which runs residential sessions led by international artists, theorists, activists, and academics every summer for predominantly American post-graduate arts students selected by merit. See: Thompson, Nato (2012) *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. MIT. See pp.140-1. Also: Lange-Berndt, P (2011) 'Test Site Bohemia' in *Texte zur Kunst*. No. 81. March 2011.

² For a description and discussion of an Alchemist's Shack session, see Priest, Iris (2012) 'As Above, So Below (Aether, Elixer, Ethanol)' in *Canned Magazine*, Newcastle. 2012.

³ See Williams, Robert & Wilson, Bryan McGovern (2013) *Cumbrian Alchemy*. Unipress Cumbria. Carlisle. A project which explores folkloric relay methods to warn future generations of deep-time geologic nuclear repositories: also 'The Atomic Priesthood' in Seboek, T (1984) *Communication Measures to Bridge Ten Millenia* – <http://www.osti.gov/scitech/biblio/6705990/>. See also: Carpenter, E (2016) *The Nuclear Culture Sourcebook*. Black Dog.

time in the project and book *Calvariae Disjecta: The many hauntings of Burton Agnes Hall* (2017)⁴.

***An Ordinall of Alchimy* (2010)**

For the project *An Ordinall of Alchimy*, Mark Dion and I were commissioned by *Cabinet Magazine*⁵ to make an artwork that reflected the work of the Alchemist's Shack project, to be shown initially at their exhibition space in Brooklyn⁶. But this is *Cabinet Magazine*, which meant that they did so with some conditions and caveats. First, the project had to be about alchemy, and it had to be housed in a display vehicle acting as a sort of *wunderkammer*⁷ built to contain an alchemical collection. Significantly, it also had to source its collection of objects exclusively from web-based market, *Ebay*. The sourcing of such objects seemed an impossible task, given that there was an almost limitless field to draw from. In consideration of this range, we required some kind of guiding principles in order to organize the process of selection. What was needed was a structure, and this was created by adopting the principles of the *Seven Doors of Practical Alchemy* attributed to the 15th century English alchemist George Ripley⁸. These terms, their definitions and categories formed a debate amongst the Fellows at Mildred's Lane, the analysis and interpretation of which was significant within the relational discourse as process.

Calcination:

Thermal decomposition for phase change: removal of volatile fractions; post-corpus ossiferous material.

Fixation:

Transformation of volatile substances into form: solid, less volatile, unaffected by fire; deep focus, obsession.

Solution:

Homogenous mixture composed of 2 or more substances; practical and intellectual insight, causal guidance.

Distillation:

Separating mixtures based on differences in volatility – physical separation not alchemical transformation;
consolidation, consideration, rumination.

Sublimation:

Solid to gas, often without an intermediary state (liquid), the sublime.

⁴ See Williams, Robert (2017) *Calvariae Disjecta: The many hauntings of Burton Agnes Hall*. Information As Material. York – The folkloric story of a 'Screaming Skull' tracked across 150 years and more than 100 different accounts. The book was long listed for the 2017 Katherine Briggs Award by the British Folklore Society..

⁵ The \$999 Project.

⁶ It was also shown at the Slought Institute at Philadelphia in 2010.

⁷ Williams has worked extensively with Dion on a number of Wunderkammer Projects, e.g. *The Tate Thames Dig* (1999), *Theatrum Mundi: Armarium* (2001), and *The Academy of Things* (2015) see: Coles, A & Dion, M (eds.) (1999) *Mark Dion: Archaeology*. Black Dog; Mauriés, Patrick (2002) *Cabinets of Curiosities*. Thames & Hudson; Renfrew, Colin (2003) *Figuring It Out*. Thames & Hudson; Lange-Berndt, P & Rübel, D (2015) *The Academy of Things*. König.

⁸ See Ashmole, E (1652) *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*.

<https://archive.org/details/theatrumchemicum00ashm/page/n6/mode/2up>; also a copy at The Wellcome Collection Library, London.

Separation:

Isolation by filtration, discarding unworthy material; the abject.

Projection:

Base metal/substance becoming precious metal or substance;
transformation/transmutation

According to the stipulation of the commission, once collected and installed within a *wunderkammer*, the work would then be put back on *Ebay* as a job lot. The research question here, to investigate the idea of value, which was particularly interesting given the current economic situation at the time, which followed the great financial crash of 2007. In short, the project was to test the theory that *prima materia* could indeed be turned to gold?

The research was informed by our consideration of Rosicrucian⁹ ideas dating from the 16th century. The association here was to consider the idea of the two worlds of imagination and intellect that characterizes the work of the English alchemist Robert Fludd¹⁰. These were consciously brought to bear on our enterprise in considering *Theoria* and *Practica*¹¹, not as binaries, but as interconnected, sometimes messy or fuzzy thinking that, together with Le Witt's *Aphorisms*, underpinned the making of the inter-related domains within the organigram.

Careful consideration and debate of the seven categories were a significant part of this relational process. Attention was given to make the objects and substances that we were buying function or to reference directly the alchemical categories and their determinations, in order to ensure that they were able to match the qualities of the objects and materials that we collected. All this activity resulted in the amassing of the *Prima Materia* of our alchemical enterprise, which became, metaphorically, hermetic wisdom. Hidden away by its packaging as it arrived at *Cabinet's* offices, these parcels were mysterious containers of strange, possibly dangerous objects and materials. The relational discourse was again invoked to re-categorise, and to further organize the material with reference to the guiding principles of the *Seven Doors*. This was achieved *in-situ* when the parcels were unpacked at Cabinet by Mildred's Lane fellows¹², Dion, and myself. To be honest, I was not sure about opening the packages, I thought that these mysterious things could have been as equally eloquent about hermetic knowledge, keeping their secrets whilst remaining locked away within their packaging. [These are potentially dangerous things that should be contained... but Dion insisted, and indeed we did find dangerous things alright.... \(Union Flag\) What I like about this picture is Mark's pitying expression...](#) Nonetheless, the parcels were unpacked, and their contents organized. What was needed next was a cabinet or *wunderkammer* to contain our alchemical collections. The form that this took was developed with reference to George Ripley's alchemical student, Thomas Norton. The famous image of *Norton's Cosmos*,

⁹ See: Yates, F (1986) *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. ARK.

¹⁰ See: Craven, J (1902) *Dr. Robert Fludd*. Kessinger re-print; Godwin, J (1979) *Robert Fludd: Hermetic philosopher and surveyor of two worlds*. Thames & Hudson.

¹¹ Also a matter of interest for alchemist Michael Mair see: *Tripos Aureus* Frankfurt, 1618. The title page of which shows Basil Valentine, Thomas Norton and Joseph Cremer demonstrating the two critical positions of *Theoria* and *Practica* within an alchemical library and an alchemical laboratory.

¹² 2009 Mildred's Lane Fellows at *Cabinet* were Matt Bettine, Kathryn Cornelius, Joseph Cruz, Gabriella d'Italia, Aislinn Pentecost-Farren, Bryan Wilson, and Laura Wertheim.

itself a wonderful organigram, is a metaphorical construction which references the alchemical *Athanor*, the alchemist's furnace, the site of alchemical transmutations. This became the model for our activation of the great work.

An example of the material linked to one of these 7 Doors of Alchimy installed within our Athanor – in this case the 100% genuine dragon skull that we bought on eBay, which joins other ossiferous objects in the signification and invocation of the category of Calcination – and so it followed for all the other categories.

The completed work *An Ordinall of Alchimy* at *Cabinet's* exhibition space exists then as a physical embodiment of the alchemical thinking and processes that created it. A three-dimensional organigram, it reveals the fanciful relationship of objects and materials through the *Seven Doors of Alchimy*, and maps the interpretations, connections and relations of the process that formed it. *An Ordinall of Alchimy*, failed to make its reserve on Ebay, the final bid not exceeding \$3.48 – perhaps the shipping cost of \$500.00 put bidders off? In this case at least, all the gold was transmuted in reverse, to become base material, what economists might refer to as *negative equity*, a reversal of the Capitalist project.

Ghosts: *Dis Manibus: A Taxonomy of Ghosts from popular forms* (2013)

During all the Alchemist's Shack sessions a regular event that emerged was the telling of ghost stories around the bonfire. These tales naturally ranged from personal anecdote, the retelling of folk stories, joke telling, performance, and even song. What struck me about this very ordinary, yet extraordinary social and cultural activity was that everyone was able to engage, everyone had something to say about a subject that has enormous social and cultural power. This seemed to me to be significant. The subject has such power, that it became clear that there was an opportunity to explore ghosts, ghost-seeing and ghost thinking, with a mind to the construction of a taxonomy that seeks to identify common denominators in the varied descriptions, tropes and characteristics of ghosts drawn from a selection of popular cultural sources.

The research themes entered the world as a consequence of the *Alchemist's Shack* sessions of 2012 led by myself and Berlin based cultural sociologist, Dr. Hilmar Schäfer. The text and document, *Dis Manibus: A Taxonomy of Ghosts* is an organigram and essay, the pamphlet graphics were designed by Natalie Wilkin, with tin-type photography by Corey Riddell, published in the UK by the conceptual imprint Information as Material and the University of Cumbria in 2013. It is interesting that *Dis Manibus: A Taxonomy of Ghosts from Popular Forms*, predates much writing on what became known in the UK as the turns *The Folk Horror Revival*¹³ and contemporary Hauntology¹⁴, and references similar territories of popular sources from 1970's British uncanny TV, ghost stories by M.R. James, psychogeographers such as Peter Ackroyd (2010)¹⁵ and artist/writers such as Maria Fusco

¹³ See: Scovell, A (2017) *Folk Horror: Hours dreadfull and things strange*. Auteur; Fisher, M (2017) *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater, and Paciorek, A (2017) *Otherworldly: Folk Horror Revival at the British Museum*. Wyrd Harvest Press – Proceedings of the conference held 16.10.16.

¹⁴ See: Derrida, J (1994) *Specters of Marx*. Routledge; Fisher, M (2012) 'What is Hauntology' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.66, No.1. Fall 2012 pp:16-24.

¹⁵ See: Ackroyd, P (2010) *Hawksmoor*. Penguin.

(2011)¹⁶. It may be that we were entering the *Zeitgeist* – or it may be that the context of Mildred's Lane had something to do with it...

The research question for the project suggested that, rather in the manner of an entomologist studying beetles, for example, might it be possible to identify and to map the behavior, and characteristics of ghosts in a similar way? Clearly, given the subject of the enquiry, it was difficult for us to make direct observations ourselves, and so the document emerged from the exercise of identifying the various tropes from source material based on popular conceptions of ghosts and hauntings. Typically, this involved debate and discourse during our seminar sessions, often led by Dr. Schäfer. It was Schäfer who was instrumental in working with the graphic designer of our publication, Natalie Wilkin, on the early construction and design of the *spidergram* that ultimately formed our domains and categories. Of course, we considered other organigrams at an early stage in the process – particularly in the identification of category and sub-category. Early iterations of the project that emerged during those discussions offered aesthetic considerations too, such as the tendril or vein-like connecting elements that were thought to be redolent of spooky, ephemeral or wraith-like forms; on reflection, rather Cthulhu-like¹⁷.

Given that ghosts and ghost-seeing formed the underpinning aspect of the enquiry, we were interested in their different behaviours manifesting in the various sources. For example, some ghosts are associated with specific places; from the story reported by Pliny the Younger of the haunting of the Greek Philosopher Athenodorus¹⁸, to Oscar Wilde's (1887) *Canterville Ghost*¹⁹, and even to stories of Ghostly Roman centurions marching through the basement of the Treasurer's House at York²⁰. Ghosts then, in popular culture, are often bound to the place, or building, or space, where they are doomed to occupy the liminal space between the dead and the living. In other circumstances ghosts may serve as a function of remembering. In that they can also provide us with a way to imagine the deep past as a kind of *archaeological imaginary*.

Montague Rhodes James²¹, a mediaevalist, once Master of Kings College, Cambridge, and later the Provost of Eton, is regarded as one of the pre-eminent British ghost story writers of the early twentieth century. His stories evoke well what I refer to as the *antiquarian imaginary*. His stories are also often uncanny in the Freudian²² sense, focusing on the mundane and ordered lives of staid academics, who are then thrown into direct and shocking contact with the *supernatural otherly* that intrudes into their quotidian world. James' story 'O Whistle and I'll Come to You my Lad' of 1904²³ is a fascinating take on the white-sheeted figure of the classic ghost. The story involves the fussy anti-hero Professor

¹⁶ See: Fusco, M (ed.) (2011) *Who Is This Who Is Coming? Inscription as method in contemporary art writing*. Article Press.

¹⁷ In this instance, I mean a many-tentacled, otherworldly form redolent of Lovecraft's horrors.

¹⁸ See: Radice, Betty (trans. & ed.) (1969) *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*. Penguin Classics. pp. 203-207

¹⁹ See: Wilde, O (2006) *The Canterville Ghost*. Aegypan

²⁰ The story of Roman ghosts seen by ex-policeman Harry Martindale in the early 1950's. This story has such a significance that Martindale's testimony has been used by archaeologists and museums in York to interpret real archaeological remains. See: Hallam, Jack (1976) *Ghosts of the North*. David & Charles. p.101.

²¹ 1862-1936.

²² See Freud, S (1909) *The Uncanny*. Penguin Classics (2003 edition).

²³ Published in James, M.R (1904) *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Edward Arnold.

Parkins, both a skeptic and practitioner of what James impishly calls *Ontography*. A fervent unbeliever in the supernatural, whom after finding an antique mediaeval whistle at a lonely archaeological site, summons something dreadful from the depths of the past when he blows it to elicit a note. James' *oeuvre*, in literature and as adaptations in other media, became significant sources in the process of forming the organigram. In consequence, informing the research were other manifestations of James' work. One example is the important 1957 film directed by Jacques Tourneur, *Night of the Demon*²⁴, adapted from James' story, *Casting the Runes*²⁵ of 1911. Particularly interesting is the famous séance scene with channelling medium Mr. Meek, which exemplifies the trope of the fake medium momentarily becoming a true medium²⁶. James' themes were taken up by Director Lawrence Gordon Clark in his 1972 adaptation of *A Warning to the Curious*²⁷, part of the fabled BBC series *Ghost Stories for Christmas*²⁸ shown annually on UK Television during the early to mid 1970's. Here, James' amateur archaeologist, Mr. Paxton, is persecuted by the otherworldly guardian of an Anglo-saxon crown that protects England from invasion after he excavates it from within an ancient *tumulus*. These films, and many other supernaturally oriented British television programmes²⁹, pepper the 1970's giving the decade, viewed from the perspective of now, a particularly haunted texture, a sort of uncanny nostalgia for those of us that lived it, and an idealized past that exists but never was for those uncovering it as a sort of *Otherly* mis-remembered history³⁰.

Amongst the further references for our *Taxonomy*, another figure is prominent in signalling the weird tropes and ideas that crisscross the research field – this is the writer of speculative fiction, uncanny and supernatural stories, the Manxman, Nigel Kneale. Born on the Isle of Man, his childhood was much influenced by local myth and legend that has a peculiarly Norse underpinning; for example, the spectres known as the *Barguest*³¹ and *Buggane*³², the land of faerie (*ferrish*) and the constant appeasement of nature spirits bound to specific locations. His hugely influential TV play made in 1972, *The Stone Tape*³³ builds on the idea that somehow events can be recorded onto the fabric and material of reality – buildings, places, objects, and then replayed (*via* some sort of medium, a person,

²⁴ See: Earnshaw, T (2005) *Beating the Devil: The making of Night of the Demon*. Tomahawk Press. DVD re-released 2010 Mediumrare Entertainment VFD09818.

²⁵ James, M.R (1911) *More Ghost Stories*. Edward Arnold.

²⁶ Other examples include: Madame Arcati in Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1945); Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990) and Professor Trelawny in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004).

²⁷ First published in James, M.R (1925) *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories*. Edward Arnold. This episode, first shown on Christmas Eve 1972, starred actors Peter Vaughan and Clive Swift. Available on DVD in the BFI Collection released in 2012 as VFD66171. See also notes to the DVD Collection, Easterbrook, A (2012) 'A Warning to the Curious' in *The M.R. James Collection: Tales from the master of the ghost story*. BFI. pp.10-13.

²⁸ Shown between 1971-1978 – Series with 14 episodes. Dir. Lawrence Gordon Clark.

²⁹ e.g. Dir. McTaggart, J (1970) *Robin Redbreast*. Re-released 2013 as DVD VFD78424. BFI; BBC Series *Dead of Night* (1972) re-released BFI 2013 as VFD78339; BBC series *Supernatural* 1977 re-released BFI 2013 2 Discs VFD78684 and VFD78722.

³⁰ See Fisher (2017) for his distinction between the weird and the eerie.

³¹ From *Bar-geist* – literally Gate-Ghost.

³² A creature similar to the Scandinavian Troll.

³³ Dir. Sasdy, P (1972). *The Stone Tape*. DVD re-released BBC/BFI 2001 VFC24416/BFIVD 516. Starring actors Michael Bryant, Jane Asher and Iain Cuthbertson.

object or set of circumstances) to be experienced as ghosts or presences³⁴. This theme of deep-time ancient terrors also forms part of Kneale's 1976 story entitled *Baby*³⁵. A young couple find, hidden in the walls of their centuries-old cottage, a ceramic vessel containing the body of an homunculus or familiar, deposited as a kind of foundation sacrifice, the discovery of which has unintended and horrific consequences for the pregnant protagonist.

Referencing these sources and others, our *Taxonomy* observes, notes, details, and maps the context, behaviour and disposition of ghosts within the research field. In addition to building the organigram, we also made the business of Spirit Photography part of our enquiry. The tin-type photographs that resulted were not simply documents of the session and its participants, but was also a practical investigation and a re-creation of the methods used by the American Spirit Photographer William H. Mumler of Boston³⁶ to create his uncanny photographs. In one image, we see Hilmar Schäfer ready to haunt me in our chilling double portrait - complete with winding sheet and *memento mori*, the Professor haunted by a guilty past perhaps?

Paris: DM: A Taxonomy of Ghosts from Popular Forms – The ExtraNaturel Mural (2016)

DM: A Taxonomy of Ghosts from Popular Forms was translated into another form for the *ExtraNaturel*³⁷ exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 2016. Here, the document is re-imagined and re-made as a new artefact with new collaborators³⁸. The elements making up the work transmute to become real gold, silver and copper leaf, to form a materialized development from the Mildred's Lane organigram. Here the work achieves actual electrical connection *via* the copper leaf, with the potential to become activated, and might (as much as it serves to link the domains that reveal the behavior of ghosts), under the correct circumstances, function as a mediumistic device to invoke the unseen.

The scale and context of this site-specific work alters the way in which the relations between the categories are understood. Necessarily, it also requires the presence of the human as the *medium* to activate the work – its identity as a thing made by hand, rather than the mechanically produced document changes its nature, invites a very different relationship to that of the printed form. Site-specifically therefore, it mediates between ideas of the supernatural in their representations within the École collections spanning 500 years of history and containing medieval artifacts, architecture, master prints and paintings by artists such as Francisco de Goya, Albrecht Dürer, Baccio Baldini, Francesco Piranesi, Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Jean Honoré Fragonard. Here, the work functioning as a means not to represent or to be reductive in the way that the document version might be thought to

³⁴ This idea continues to inform contemporary ideas of the ghostly that we see in popular TV such as *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures* in the US, *Most Haunted* in the UK, and the myriad of other contemporary ghost-hunting shows.

³⁵ ATV/Granada series *Beasts* (1976) produced by Nicholas Palmer. DVD re-released 2006 Network 'Baby' Dir. John Nelson (1976) Disc 1 - VFC93785 – starring actors Jane Wymark, Simon MacCorkindale and T.P McKenna first broadcast 5.11.76.

³⁶ See: Cloutier, C (2004) 'Mumler's Ghosts' in Chéroux, C & Fischer, A *et al.* (2005) *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*. Yale. pp.20-29.

³⁷ Curated by Sarina Basta and Mark Dion. See: Le Thoral, P (2016) *ExtraNaturel*. Beaux-Arts de Paris éditions. pp.126-129.

³⁸ Shane and Sue Johnson.

operate, but rather like the Grimoires and mediaeval images with which it shares a space in the exhibition, to visualize, and to thereby to invoke the ExtraNaturel, the Otherworld.

Thank You.

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